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## QUEEN ANNE AND QUEEN ALCESTIS.

Chaucer's Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* has long had its riddles requiring solution. The question most discussed recently has been that of the allegorical interpretation of Chaucer's fervid worship of the daisy and of his devotion to the mythical heroine, Queen Alcestis. In 1890 Ten Brink advanced the theory that both the daisy and Alcestis were intended to represent Queen Anne. This view was generally accepted until Professor Lowes challenged it in 1904.<sup>1</sup> Since that time the question of the identification of Queen Anne with Alcestis and the daisy has been much discussed and argued pro and con.<sup>2</sup> When we read version B<sup>3</sup> for internal testimony, we are indeed somewhat bewildered with the array of evidence that can be gathered on both sides of the case. It is almost paradoxical, as the following summary of some of the arguments will show. We shall first review the arguments for identification, and then those against it. Our final purpose is to offer a solution which attempts to reconcile to each other the conflicting groups of arguments.<sup>4</sup>

First of all on the side of identification, we have conclusive proof that Queen Anne was in Chaucer's mind when he wrote the Prologue. Lines 496-7 tell us that the *Legend of Good Women* was to be presented to her in her palace at Shene. Secondly there is described in the Prologue a queen, much like Queen Anne, although she bears the name of the

<sup>1</sup> *Publications of the Modern Lang. Ass. of America*, XIX, 593 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Compare the argument of Professor Tatlock in *The Development and Chronology of Chaucer's Works*, pp. 102 ff; of Professor Kitzredge in *Modern Philology*, VI, 435 ff; and of Professor Moore in *Modern Language Review*, VII, 488 ff.

<sup>3</sup> In this article, I approach the question of identification from the standpoint of version B, since the priority of that version over version A, thanks to Professor Lowes and Professor Tatlock, seems to be generally accepted. All references, therefore, will be to version B, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>4</sup> In what follows, I am indebted to Professor Root for certain suggestions, arising from work in a graduate class conducted by him.

mythical heroine Alcestis. She is young, beautiful, merciful, and an exemplary wife. These are all characteristics of the living Queen. In the next place Alcestis in the Prologue is identified with the daisy, just as ladies then living, were identified with that flower in the *marguerite* poems of Chaucer's distinguished French contemporaries, Machault, Froissart, and Deschamps.<sup>1</sup> To be identified with the daisy was the kind of honor which would be particularly pleasing to Queen Anne. She was young and presumably a lover of fashion. Symbolism by flowers was one of the fads of the time, as is attested by the prevalence of the flower and leaf *balades*. An introduction of a *marguerite* poem into the English court by Chaucer, one of the court poets,<sup>2</sup> would attract general attention. In a poem, presented to her, perhaps written at her express command, if we may believe Lydgate,<sup>3</sup> Queen Anne might well expect to receive the chief honor. Everyone, who had intelligent interest in such matters, would be asking who the flower was, for we need not suppose that the fourteenth century Englishman was less likely to make conjectures than we are today.

The view that Queen Anne was meant to be identified with the daisy gains additional confirmation in an examination of lines 84-96, the lines which Mr. Lowes shows to have

<sup>1</sup>One of the achievements of Mr. Lowes in the article above cited is to elucidate the prevalence of these poems.

<sup>2</sup>See the article by Mr. Kittredge on "Chaucer and some of his Friends" in *Modern Philology*, I, 1-18; and also Mr. Tatlock's presentation of Chaucer's connection with the court, in *Chaucer Chronology*, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-9. The mere facts that Chaucer wrote the *Parlement of Foules* to celebrate the betrothal of Richard and Anne, and that the *Legend* is to be presented to the Queen, go a long way toward indicating the relations of Chaucer, as a poet, with the royal family.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. the Prologue to the *Fall of Princes*.

"This poet wrote, at the request of the quene,

A Legende, of perfite holynesse." etc.

For references, in which the value of this allusion has been discussed, see Mr. Tatlock's *Chronology*, *op. cit.*, p. 111-2. If this be only a conjecture of Lydgate, based on internal evidence from the Prologue, it is none the less interesting as the conjecture of an Englishman almost contemporary with Chaucer.

been borrowed from the *Filostrato* of Boccaccio.<sup>1</sup> The latter wrote the passage in honor of a living lady. But Chaucer uses it to honor a lady through the medium of the flower. He refers with almost passionate fervor to the daisy as his light, the mistress of his wits, the guide who leads him in this dark world, his lady sovereign, his earthly god. It would seem absurd for Chaucer to lavish such extravagant homage upon the pale figure of a long forgotten mythical heroine, like Alcestis. Chaucer, staid and forty-five, would become a visionary, a chaser after moonbeams. Moreover we must not disregard the transition which later leads to the dream. Alcestis has not been introduced as yet. She is distinctly a figure of the dream. We should hardly expect Chaucer to make Alcestis the guiding star of his life here in the waking day in the field.

After reading this passage, if we go on in the poem, we find another, which not only tends to confirm the impression of Queen Anne's identification with the daisy, but also induces the belief that Queen Anne is to be identified with the lady of the dream as well. The dream has begun, and a lady has been led in by the god of Love. She is not mentioned here by name. Chaucer merely alludes to her as "a quene" (213). The specific name Alcestis is not introduced until much later in the poem. Chaucer thus describes the effect made on his dazzled eyes. He says, "If men were to seek over the earth, they could not find a creature one-half so beautiful as she." (241-6) Now Queen Anne was not only on the earth, but, what is more, she was in Chaucer's mind, for he dedicates the poem to her. This would seem a sorry compliment to Queen Anne, when she came to read it, if Alcestis and Alcestis alone is meant.

These words are scarcely out of Chaucer's mouth, before he is moved to express the same sentiment in the form of a *balade*. (249-269) The burden of his song is, that the approaching lady is fairer than all other fair and peerless ladies. She may disdain them all. No name has been mentioned. Yet Chaucer seems not to doubt who the lady is.

<sup>1</sup> See the article of Mr. Lowes above cited, pp. 618-626.

It is "his lady" as we learn from the refrain thrice repeated. And so we are inclined to identify her with the lady praised through the daisy in the working day in the field.

More tributes to the lady follow the *balade*. Among them we find this line:

I prey to God that ever falle hir faire! (277)

This line strikes us queerly. To judge from the meaning, it is a prayer made for one who is to be subject to future dangers, who is to live the hazardous life of earth. It is not a natural note to arise spontaneously<sup>1</sup> in the mind of a poet, when speaking solely of Alcestis, whose earthly troubles may now be considered to have passed, seeing that she lives with Cupid in the "Paradys" of the blessed. (564) Chaucer certainly cannot profess to be anxious about her welfare. And so behind this line, we think we see a prayer for the future health and prosperity of the living Queen.

Let us now consider the arguments which militate against identification. They are short but apparently decisive, especially that contained in the following lines, found when we approach the close of the poem:

And whan this book is maad, yive hit the quene

On my behalfe, at Eltham, or at Shene. (496-7)

These words are spoken by Alcestis. Now if Alcestis is Queen Anne, we realize the absurdity of the situation. It is as if Alcestis should say "on my behalf give the book to myself", nonsense for which we cannot easily give an explanation.

This presentation ordered by Alcestis is followed up a few lines later with a vivid allusion to the descent of Alcestis into hell. (513-16) Again if Queen Anne is Alcestis, it certainly is not a pleasing picture which associates her with so gruesome an event. Rather than believe Chaucer so tactless, so entirely without discrimination, we would almost entirely discard the identification.

<sup>1</sup> See A 180, where the name Alcestis is specifically mentioned. An idea, which had arisen spontaneously out of the conditions under which B was written, might well remain in A, revised under different conditions. The inferences, to which a single line of this kind might lead, could easily escape Chaucer's notice in a working over of the Prologue.

Then over and above these facts, when we conclude the Prologue, we are left with this inquiry in our minds: How would Chaucer have told the story of Alcestis among the number of the legends, if it were encumbered with the allegorical trappings which connected it with the name of Queen Anne? It would have been embarrassing to attempt to carry on the allegorical interpretation throughout the rather dismal events of the life of Alcestis. But Chaucer, once having identified the two queens, would have found it a delicate matter to disentangle Alcestis from the double identity. So the conclusion is that the identity never existed, for originally he certainly intended to incorporate the tale in the *Legend*.<sup>1</sup>

When we recall all that has been said above, it will be seen that a fairly good case can be made either for or against identification. There is only one path out of the maze, and that is to make the explanation as shifting, as self-adjustable, as the identification itself seems to be. And after all the problems of the Prologue are not the problems of mathematics. If Alcestis=the daisy, and Queen Anne=the daisy, it is not necessary to assume that Queen Anne=Alcestis=the daisy, for ever one, and inseparable.

It will be noted that the arguments, based on internal evidence, *for* identification come almost entirely in the early part of the poem; the arguments against it, in the latter part. We have reached by a deduction from the distribution of the passages on which the arguments above are based, from the scattered allusions to the daisy throughout the poem and from considerations soon to be enlarged upon, the following conclusions. Till the beginning of the dream, Chaucer's worship of the daisy in the field does honor to Queen Anne and Queen Anne alone. Then from the beginning of the dream (210) until the first mention of Alcestis by name is a neutral zone, where Queen Anne, Alcestis and the daisy merge one into the other by an almost indefinable and dreamlike process. We feel the residual in-

<sup>1</sup>The three arguments above discussed are all urged against identification by Mr. Kittredge in his article in *Modern Philology*, VI, 435 ff.

fluence of Queen Anne from the first two hundred and ten lines and the forecasting of the influence of Alcestis to come. In the last one hundred and fifty lines of the Prologue, Alcestis stands practically alone. Queen Anne enters only in so far as the daisy enters and that is only to a very small extent. During the course of the poem, the prominence of Queen Anne and the daisy gradually diminishes to the vanishing point, whereas the prominence of Alcestis correspondingly increases.

A solution for such an interpretation of the Prologue is not to be found by emphasizing the study of it as a type of allegory. It is entirely possible to conceive that Chaucer was not deeply interested in allegory for its own sake but that he was using it rather as a tool for accomplishing two definite purposes which he had in mind, the first to compliment Queen Anne, the second to introduce the *Legend*. For these two purposes Chaucer had on hand two types of allegory; for the first purpose he had the machinery of the *marguerite* poems wherein ladies were complimented through the medium of the daisy, for the second, he had the conventional dream allegory wherein he was enabled to unfold the graceful fiction of the "good Alceste" who enjoins upon him the task of writing his poem. It was his business, after he had decided upon the two themes of the Prologue, to couple them together as smoothly as possible. If he could so unite them that the one would lend aid in heightening the effect of the other, so much the better. If he could make anything out of the fact that both Anne and Alcestis were good and beautiful queens, well and good; he would take whatever advantages accidentally happened to arise. And so well has Chaucer succeeded in blending his two *motifs*, that one is hardly aware that the earlier part of the poem, and the prolonged adoration of the daisy through almost two hundred lines is really irrelevant in the sense that it contributes nothing essential to the introduction of the *Legend of Good Women*. It now becomes our purpose to find more exactly the respective parts which Queen Anne and Queen Alcestis play in the Prologue.

We take a step toward the truth, if we can realize that all which pertains to the daisy relates primarily to Queen Anne. The Prologue is to be read with the thought in mind that Queen Anne *is* the daisy. When Alcestis first appears in the dream, she looks *like* a daisy. (214-25) She wears daisies in her crown. Her hair is covered with a fret of red gold above which the white crown rises. She is clad in a garb of green. Why? Merely to suggest the flower which Chaucer worships and to honor it further. When Alcestis and the god of love first accost Chaucer, he is still kneeling over the real daisy; (308-321) the living Alcestis stands above him. Cupid fiercely rebukes Chaucer, the scoffer at love, for profaning the flower with his presence. Cupid alludes emphatically to the daisy as "myn owne flour". From Cupid's point of view, depending on his knowledge of events soon to be disclosed, the allusion may be to Alcestis, but Chaucer and the reader have no reason for differentiating the flower over which he is now kneeling from the one originally introduced. Indeed it is almost as if Chaucer and Cupid had a misunderstanding as to whom the flower really did represent. When Cupid says what business have you near my flower, Chaucer, evidently seeing no reason why he should not be near it, replies with some spirit: "'And, why, sir,' quod I, 'and hit lyke yow?'"

Then we pass on in the poem. Any classical learning that we may happen to have receives somewhat of a shock. The god of Love, incidentally to explaining who the lady really is, casually drops the remark that she, Alcestis, had once been turned into a daisy (512). He does not explain the why nor the wherefore of this transformation, nor does he explain how, once having been turned into a daisy, she was there, a living queen. The only explanation for these surprising mysteries is to be found, it would appear, in an old book that lies in Chaucer's chest. That old book has never been discovered. Nowhere in the whole range of classical or mediaeval literature has evidence ever been found that Alcestis underwent such a transformation.<sup>1</sup> So

<sup>1</sup> See Professor Neilson's *Origins and Sources of the Court of Love*, p. 145.



far as can be discovered, it was Chaucer's imagination which produced it. And why? The invention suggested itself to Chaucer as another bond between the two queens and another sweeping compliment to Queen Anne. But it is only here at the very end of the poem that Alcestis is identified with the daisy in the literal sense that Queen Anne is identified with it.

We may consider farther the lines where Chaucer a moment later recognizes Alcestis:

Now knowe I hir! And is this good Alceste,  
The dayesye, and myn owne hertes reste? (518-19)

The transitional word between "Alceste" and "myn owne hertes reste" is to be noted. Why was Alcestis Chaucer's own heart's rest? Not particularly because she was Alcestis, but because she was a daisy, and the daisy represents Queen Anne.

We said a little while ago that there was a neutral zone in the middle of the Prologue, where the two Queens are blended. Let us look more carefully at the method of this blending. We recall Chaucer's enthusiastic praise of the approaching queen, before the mention of her name. It has often been argued that Chaucer purposely reserved the mention of the name Alcestis until very late in the Prologue, so that meantime he could leave the impression that he was praising Queen Anne. But it would be a very poor compliment to her majesty, if the lady praised turned out after all not to be she, but some one else. Suppose, however, that Chaucer intends to picture *himself* as at first mistaken in the identity of Alcestis. It would be a distinct compliment to Queen Anne to be mistaken for so glorious a lady as Chaucer describes in Alcestis. In this case all the praise showered on Alcestis, applies equally to her. There is evidence to support this view, that Chaucer pictures in the dream that he was thus mistaken. In presenting this view, we shall not think of the Prologue as a dream allegory essentially. We shall suppose, for example, that Chaucer did not bring in the belated recognition *motif*, blindly and because he thought no dream allegory would be complete

without one. We shall consider that the allegory afforded him material, in his hands more or less molten, so that he could shape it for his own purposes.

Let us examine first the *balade* wherein is found the outburst of praise of the approaching queen. It runs, somewhat as follows "hide your tresses, Absolom. Ester, lay down your meekness. Isould and Helen, hide your beauty; for *my lady* comes that all this may bedim". Chaucer says "my lady", as to him, in his enthusiasm for her beauty, it can be only one person, the lady of his own adoration. Really, as later becomes apparent, he was mistaken. It was Alcestis who approached. But he does not realize this until events begin to develop. Then the recognition gradually dawns on him. In line 432 he for the first time hears the name Alcestis. She speaks of herself as "Alceste, whylom quene of Trace". He is puzzled. The first time he has an opportunity to speak to her thereafter, he takes advantage of the opportunity to explain that he does not know who she is. After thanking her for her intercession in his interest with the God of Love, he says:

And yeve me grace so long for to live,  
That I may knowe *soothly* what ye be,  
That han me holpe and put in this degree. (459-61)

After Chaucer has finished, Alcestis replies in a speech which concludes with the injunction for Chaucer to present the book that he is to write to Queen Anne at Shene. Then the God of Love, at this allusion begins to smile:

'Wostow', quod he, 'wher this be wyf or mayde,  
Or quene, or countesse, or of what degree,  
That hath so litel penance given thee.' (499-501)

Chaucer, now, stoutly insists that he knows nothing about her. Cupid explains to his satisfaction. Finally Cupid, in his parting words, calls Chaucer's attention to the fact that he had neglected to put the name of "Alceste" in the *balade*. (537-41) Chaucer had indeed forgotten her. In a list of noble heroines of old, Alcestis should have been named along with Ester, Isould, Helen, and the rest. Cupid's rebuke shows clearly that in his mind, at least, the "my

lady" of the refrain meant not Alcestis but some unnamed lady of Chaucer's devotion. In this rebuke of Chaucer by the God of Love, we see Chaucer, the literary craftsman, using a device to stress the idea that he, in his dream, had thought the lady upon her first approach Queen Anne.<sup>1</sup>

It is to the extent just described, we believe, that Chaucer has blended the two Queens. Whether we accept the explanation as the true one, depends on whether we can think of the Prologue as a record of human feeling, involving the pride of the young queen of twenty and Chaucer's ability to comply gracefully with her wishes, or whether we think of it as an elaborate example of the dream allegory, wherein little weight may be attached to what is actually said and done.

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<sup>1</sup> It is true that the belated recognition occurs also in version A, and there Chaucer's failure to know who the lady is, might be considered even more surprising than in B, because in A her name has been mentioned from the very first. There is never any doubt in A, therefore, but that the lady is Alcestis. Mr. Moore, in a footnote to his article in the *Modern Language Review*, VII, p. 489, has urged this point to prove that the belated recognition of Alcestis in B has no bearing whatever on Queen Anne. But let us consider for the moment, with Mr. Tatlock, that version A is a revised form of the Prologue, wherein all allusions to Queen Anne are removed on account of the intense grief of Richard II at her death. According to this view Chaucer goes back and substitutes "Alceste" in the places where "my lady" previously appeared. Let us suppose, then, that in this process of revision he finally comes to the lines in B where he has described himself as learning who she really is. (507-576) He finds himself confronted with a difficulty. It is the very explanation of her identity by the god of Love which has enabled Chaucer in B to introduce the connecting link between Alcestis and the daisy. It is here that Chaucer has explained that Alcestis herself had been turned into the daisy. And this link is necessary to make plausible his introduction of the daisy *motif* in the first part of the Prologue. Rather than invent a new device for connection, he is willing to let an inconsistency stand in the revised form. Here it may be said that Mr. Tatlock's explanation for the revision of the Prologue accounts most admirably for the changes made in A.